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AUTHOR Karlin, Robert
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ABSTRACT

Research studies have attributed the reading failure of children from low socioeconomic groups to factors such as hunger, poor physical health, substandard living conditions, and the language mismatch that results from the difference between spoken nonstandard dialect and printed standard English. While each of these does influence reading achievement, two other factors seem more basic to the issue: parental attitude and the competency of the reading teacher. Parents who value reading offer the learning child a tradition of literacy, provide educational toys and experiences, involve themselves in the school's activities, and demonstrate positive behaviors that make a child want to read. By their ability to translate theory into viable teaching strategies, effective reading teachers provide the minority child with individualized instruction and special reading sessions, make available large quantities and varieties of books, and use a variety of teaching approaches and reading materials to motivate the learner. Finally, because statistics indicate a relationship between family income and reading achievement (the lower the income, the higher the percentage of failure), one possible solution to the problem of reading failure would be to increase the income level of poor families. (MAY)

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Dr. Robert Karlin
Queens College of the
City University of New York
Flushing, New York 11367

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in the Culturally Different: A Minority View

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Dr. Robert Karlin
Queens College of the
City University of New York
Flushing, New York 11367

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"2 Schools Succeed in Teaching Reading Where Others Fail"; "Reading: Why Some Progress While Others Don't"; "Study Questions Belief That Home Is More Vital to Pupil Achievement Than the School." These are headlines from The New York Times of May 28, 1973, October 31, 1971, and November 18, 1973, respectively, all of which involve unresolved issues that concern each of us and whose considerations have brought us together today. Essentially they deal with the controversy over the quality of urban education and its affect upon children who come from poverty homes. That they could be extended to include all poverty children -- rural and small town as well as inter city -- is not difficult to document.

That poverty children achieve less well in reading than do their more economically fortunate cousins is equally easy to demonstrate. We have more data about the reading achievement of the urban poor than we do about the small town and rural poor, and what we have leave no doubts about the enormity of the condition. For example, of New York City's 625 elementary schools, only one-third -- almost all of them predominately white -- had at least 50 per cent of their pupils at or above the national norm. In a number of schools the per cent of pupils whose reading scores fell below the norm for their grades was as high as 80 or more. The population of these schools is either almost all black or black and Puerto Rican and located in the poorest sections of the city. There is little doubt that comparable data will be found in other large urban cities with similar populations. There may be a shift in the nature of

the population, e.g., Puerto Rican to Chicano, but wherever poor children are in school attendance you can expect to find extensive reading problems a common condition. And in the cities the majority of the poor is Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano. In the smaller towns and rural areas poor whites account for a larger percentage of the reading problem than they do in the cities. What all these children have in common is their poverty; and a good share of them -- perhaps 70-80% and more -- experience severe difficulties in reading.

To put these data in proper perspective one should remember that long before we focused our attention upon the poor or culturally different (ordinarily they are one and the same) it was estimated that from 10 to 20 or more per cent of typical school populations were deficient in reading ability. And these school populations consisted mainly of children from lower and middle class homes where poverty as we know it did not exist. How well do I recall the large numbers of parents who were able to pay for and sought private individual and small group instruction for their children who were having difficulty in learning to read. They came and are still coming to university - sponsored and other clinics for diagnostic evaluations and reading help. We've always had poor readers among us; it's just that we can expect a much larger percentage of children from low socio-economic than from more privileged families to be deficient in reading.

Why do poor Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, American Indians and whites achieve so much less well in reading than do their more affluent counterparts? Do hunger, poor physical health and substandard living produce conditions that interfere with learning? Can we explain most of their reading failures as products of language mismatch? Are the culturally different unfamiliar with concepts needed to master reading? Are they less ready to undertake reading

instruction? Is reading failure due to teachers' treatment of children who speak a nonstandard English?

"It has been said that you can't teach a hungry child...(of course not all children from poverty homes come to school hungry; how many do is uncertain.) The possibilities for learning are also quite dubious for the child who is consistently deprived of sufficient sleep,...of adequate clothing and shelter, or of funds for school supplies and for experiential enrichment." (9)

You will agree, I'm sure, that children who must contend with mere survival are not very good prospects for learning that which does not meet basic needs. But it is doubtful that most poor readers among the culturally different suffer such extreme deprivation that they just cannot overcome its effects. To assert that no interference with learning exists in some measure for which provisions must be made does not seem to square with the facts; to ascribe failure to conditions wholly within the learner seems equally tenuous.

One might assume that because certain health defects are found more frequently among poor children than in a typical group of American children (eye and ear and heart defects, nutritional deviations) that we can establish causal relationship between them and reading failure. In a study conducted among Chicago Head Start Children, of the 14,000 medically examined about 3000 were found to suffer from major defects such as those mentioned earlier. Four per cent had some hearing loss and eight per cent some vision failure. However important it is to correct such deficiencies, these findings do not indicate that health and physical defects are a severe problem, certainly not for this urban population. Moreover, while no one will deny the possibility that physical defects might be sources of irritation and discomfort and could require children to exert greater efforts than those normally required for learning, they typically cannot be cited as causes of reading failure.

Are children from poverty homes less ready to profit from initial reading instruction than typical children? Some studies do show that they perform less well on measures of auditory and visual discrimination than do the others, and it is possible that weakness in discrimination abilities might interfere with their performances in beginning reading. But we ought not lose sight of the fact that what and how we teach are the determinants of their prerequisites. So that what prerequisites are tied to one program are not necessarily essential for another. Moreover, efforts to help children overcome deficits in auditory and visual discrimination have been successful where such instruction was tied directly to reading and not isolated from it.

Many of us contend that the experiential background of the learner is associated with success in reading. Is the concept development of poor urban children so inadequate as to prevent them from coping with reading tasks? If I might quote a position with which I tend to agree: "While lower socioeconomic children have fewer words in their vocabularies than do middle class children, it does not necessarily follow that this difference accounts for variations in reading performance... Urban black children have sufficient conceptual and usable vocabulary to handle the materials we use in school to teach them to read... A vocabulary analysis of the most widely used beginning reading books showed that ... they could handle those materials." (2) I believe that other groups of children to whom we have referred possess comparable ability to deal with the simple ideas expressed in common reading materials. And who would suggest that reading instruction be limited to the degree that only these materials should be used?

This brings us to the most widely accepted explanation of why children from culturally different environments (particularly black children and children from Spanish-speaking homes) fail to achieve in reading. There doesn't seem to be much doubt that the language patterns of children from those groups

of low socioeconomic status vary significantly from those of children who come from higher income families. (At a conference of linguists and reading researchers participants sought to identify relationships between speech and reading. They pointed out that learning to speak seems to be a relatively easy task for children, while learning to read seems difficult for many children. They went on to state that reading is not a primary but a secondary linguistic skill. Insofar as readiness for reading is concerned, the conferees concluded that some degree of linguistic awareness -- awareness of sounds within words, parts of words, and discrete words -- is necessary, particularly the ability to perceive structure and sound in words and synthesize the segments.)

We know that speakers of nonstandard English seem to have more reading difficulties than speakers of standard English. This observation has led to the study of black dialect (and in some cases the English spoken by children with Spanish-speaking backgrounds) and the extent to which it varies from spoken and written standard English. It has been hypothesized that the greater the divergence between spoken nonstandard dialect and printed standard English the less chance there is for reading success. It has been hypothesized also that speakers of black dialect who are taught to read with materials in standard English have to decode the standard English and transform it into non-standard English before they can deal with it, and this fact explains why so many of these children fail in reading.

So several suggestions have been made to cope with these conditions. Baratz and Shuy (1) urged that materials for black dialect speakers be printed in the same dialect. Goodman (5) rejected the view that special materials have to be constructed but said that the child should be encouraged to read as he speaks. Thus, if the sentence in the book were "I am going home,"

an acceptable reading of it might be "I be going home," or "I going home" because this is how the child expresses the same idea when he speaks. But the teacher would continue to speak naturally and serve as a language model for speakers of divergent dialects. Labov (12) would not correct the child whose pronunciation of words was different from standard pronunciations but would deal with errors that clearly resulted from lack of understanding (for example, where the reader failed to realize that what he was reading about occurred in the past). Other suggestions included delaying the introduction of reading instruction until children learned to speak standard English to the extent it matched the structures of the printed English.

More recently Goodman has rejected the hypothesis which he and others formulated about the cause of poor reading among black dialect speakers. He reported that from evidence of "miscue" research, it is clear that such speakers can understand standard English. They made meaningful substitutions of words in conformity with the dialect they spoke. Now he suggests that teachers' negative reactions to and rejection of this dialect plus their "confusion of linguistic difference with linguistic deficiency interferes with the natural process by which reading is acquired and undermines the linguistic self-confidence of divergent speakers." (6) (Incidentally, Baratz found that black dialect speakers converted spoken standard English into black dialect when she had them repeat statements read in standard English. She failed to realize that such conversions meant that they understood the ideas expressed in standard English. DeStefano (3) has reported similar findings. Moreover, a study by Hockman (8) in which reading tests in standard English and black dialect were taken by black and white pupils revealed no differences in scores for either group or either test). These and other data tend to support rejection

of the hypothesis that the mismatch between printed and spoken language is the cause of reading failure among dialect speakers. (7) To what extent teachers actually reject the divergent speech of dialect speakers and what influence the nature of such rejection has upon learning to read are yet to be determined.

"When it comes to the task of grasping the relationship between spelling patterns and sounds, children who speak nonstandard English may [italics added] well confront greater discrepancy between their pronunciation of a word and its representation on paper than will their .. peers who speak standard English ..."(14) The fact that the pupils pronounce words differently does not indicate that they can't or haven't learned the correspondences. In reality, it is proof that they can apply what they have learned about letter-sound associations since they convert the sounds represented by the spelling patterns into those of their dialect. Incidentally, where I used to live, words like pin -- pan -- Mary -- marry -- merry were all pronounced identically. If speakers in such regions do not have trouble with making proper associations between spelling patterns and sounds within words, why should we assume divergent speakers should? I'm inclined to agree with Goodman that the problem -- at least on this issue -- is more in the minds of teachers who try to impose standard pronunciations on speakers of nonstandard English than with the latter.

One more point about recognizing words. Just as speakers of standard English use syntactic and semantic clues in contextual reading, so do speakers of nonstandard English. In most instances the structures of non-standard English parallel those of standard English so that speakers of the former can and do respond to the same constraints as they encounter unfamiliar words in contextual reading.

You may have concluded by now that I have many reservations about popular

explanations for reading failures among the culturally different. To my knowledge hard evidence to support common sense but hypothetical positions is lacking. Too many conclusions have been drawn by inference; in other cases correlations have been interpreted as causality. Now then, you might ask, do I explain the massive reading failures so common to the urban, small town and rural poor? Before I respond I should admit that like others who have already made firm pronouncements I don't have the hard data to support my beliefs. But it is one thing to identify beliefs as hypotheses and quite another to behave as those hypotheses have been demonstrated.

"There is nothing inherent or God-given in wanting to learn to read. One does so because one sees reasons for reading or is expected to learn to read. Middle-class children usually see reasons for reading because environmental factors have encouraged them to read or have at least pointed them in the right direction." (13) I suspect that this is not the case for many children from poverty homes.

As Johnson points out in discussing the social backgrounds of Blacks, "poverty ... prevents many black children from having the kinds of experiences that support the instructional efforts of the school. Trips to cultural facilities, books in the home, educational toys ... that satisfy needs outside of school -- cost money Educational experiences are secondary." (10) He goes on to say that as a result of discriminatory practices before and after the Civil War and until quite recently, blacks lack a tradition of literacy.

I'm not familiar with conditions in most cities but in New York there is a group of highly vocal parents in poor communities who appear to take an interest in the schools and their programs and who verbalize their concern

about the schools failure to teach their children to read well. I suspect that with some exceptions the dissatisfaction stems as much from political considerations as it does from educational concerns. And there is little evidence that the average dwellers in these communities -- those whose major concern is survival -- really manifest the same attitudes toward school and education as do their more prosperous counterparts. Johnson believes that "though black people lack a long tradition of literacy, they generally have a positive attitude toward education ... they encourage their children to go to school ... However, their own ignorance, lack of education, or economic poverty often prevents them from knowing just how to support the efforts of the school." (11) I'm not sure we can generalize about all poverty groups, but I think that parent's attitudes toward learning to read as demonstrated by positive behaviors common to the middle class are dynamic forces that can make a difference. If children want to learn to read, the battle is at least half won. I suspect that too few poor children really care about reading or learning to read for the reasons that I have suggested.

The results of a study of schools and learning conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements which surveyed 250,000 students and 50,000 teachers in 22 countries, including the United States, lends support to the hypothesis that I have suggested and to another that I will suggest in a moment. According to Professor Alan C. Purvis of the University of Illinois, one of the authors of the Association's report, home background seemed to play an important role in learning to read and that wide variations in achievement seemed to be related more to variations in home background than to differences between schools. This conclusion isn't very much different from that reached in the Coleman Report of 1966,

but with one major distinction. Purvis pointed out that "what we call home background may be a cumulative effect of home and school that is very difficult to disentangle. A child is the product of all his past -- his own, his parents', his teachers'. You simply cannot say it is either home or school." I believe it is both, though not necessarily in equal proportions. We have little substantive data that we can rely upon to assign weights to one or the other. But I should guess that the proportions would vary from group to group and school to school. Incidentally, the International Association study was able to account on the average for but 39 per cent of the performance variance, leaving 61 per cent unexplained. This fact points up a general weakness in most educational research -- our inability to detect and measure conditions that contribute to variations in performance.

Have you guessed what my second hypothesis on a cause of reading failure among poor pupils is? It is tied to the first. Because such pupils come to school lacking what I consider to be the most crucial element in readiness -- a keen interest in books and learning to read -- reading programs that seem adequate for the majority of children are just not good enough for the children who do not bring with them the same kind of motivation for reading. We have to do a better job in teaching reading to these children than we can get away with with others. Perhaps you've heard someone make the facetious statement that children learn to read in spite of the schools. I believe there is some truth in the observation.

All the furor over competency-based teacher education and accountability originates from the schools' inability to produce results that demonstrate that they can teach children with poverty backgrounds to read. Although I have some real reservations about these movements which have caused some state education departments to propose changes in the way teachers will be certified,

I can't help but believe that better teachers of reading will produce better readers among those whose reading achievement is rather dismal. If I didn't believe this, how could I (and incidentally others too) justify my role in directing specialist reading programs.

There have been some surveys on how knowledgeable teachers are about some aspects of teaching reading. As I read the results, I can't come to conclusions other than those which suggest that teachers as a group are not thoroughly familiar with the craft. Of course, there are many aspects about reading and the teaching of reading that we don't know much about or about which there are questions. But as I read the present state of affairs, too many teachers lack enough information about less debatable issues regarding methodologies and materials for teaching reading to permit them to cope with the challenges that poverty populations present.

I find that even where teachers seem knowledgeable about reading there is a wide gap between their ability to discuss reading concepts and their ability to translate them into viable teaching strategies. So that when they have to face 30 children, they feel insecure and grasp for panaceas. Perhaps this is one reason why so many of our schools depend almost exclusively upon basal readers with their accompanying manuals, for without the latter a large number of teachers wouldn't know how and where to begin and what directions to take.

Can the schools make a difference in the reading progress of pupils with poverty backgrounds? There is some evidence that they can. Three schools in New York City, (91 Bklyn., 11 Manhattan, 129 Manhattan,) one in Kansas City (Woodland School) and another in Los Angeles (Ann Street School) appear to have made a dent in expected failure patterns. One of the New York City Schools with a population of more than 80% black and 9 per cent

of Puerto Rican or other Hispanic backgrounds, with about half eligible for extra financial aid, reported that 51.4 per cent scored at or above the national norms on citywide reading tests. In two of the other New York City schools whose populations satisfied the poverty criteria, "the third grade reading achievements equalled or exceeded the national norm and were on about the same level as those in schools with average - income enrollments. According to the reports the identifiable qualities shared by the schools and found absent in many others were:

1. strong leadership by individuals who were respected by teachers and pupils and took a personal interest in the reading program.
2. high expectations with efforts to prove it.
3. strong emphasis upon reading with accompanying availability in each classroom of large quantities and varieties of books.
4. special reading personnel used to work with teachers in upgrading the instructional program.
5. reliance upon no single approach or sets of reading materials.
6. individualization through small groups and special reading sessions.
7. parent involvement with schools.

I think we can agree that these qualities can be duplicated in most of our schools without huge expenditures. Insofar as New York City schools are concerned, we have too many examples of reading projects into which huge sums of Federal monies were poured with few additional returns. Would that this money have been spent on teaching personnel rather than on unproved and untried packages of some sort or another! It's not what's in these packages that counts. You, the teacher, is what makes the differences.

When I first started out in this business -- I won't tell you how long ago it was -- I acquired a reputation for being an iconoclast -- someone

who wouldn't swallow without question what most people were saying and advocating. I know that it isn't popular to take the positions on reading that I've tried to enuciate here. I guess my iconoclasm (you might call them biases) is showing. I believe we can test the two hypotheses that I have proposed with the expectation of receiving no less than tentative confirmations or rejections of them. Perhaps the National Institute of Education will be the agency through which some light and less heat on emotional issues such as those we're considering will prevail.

There is another possible solution I hesitate to suggest for fear of what I might be charged with. It is a fairly simple one - one whose efficiency could be easily verified. Let me first cite some figures. A report entitled Literacy Among Youths 12-17 Years Old issued in 1973 by the U.S. Government Printing Office, reveals that in a study conducted between 1966 and 1970 it was found that of 6700 youths who took The Brief Test of Literacy (a measure of the level of achievement attained by the average child by the beginning of fourth grade), 9.8% of white and 22.1% of black students whose families had an income of less than \$3000 failed the test, 3.5% of white and 12.6% of blacks whose families had an income of between \$5000-7000 failed the test, and only 0.8% of white and 4.7% of blacks whose families earned more than \$10,000 failed the test. The percentages of failure for both white and black students dropped dramatically as their family incomes rose. A 1974 study by a council on children supported by the Carnegie Corporation found that only 0.4% of children born to the bottom tenth of income would ever rise to the top, while 33% born into the top tenth would remain there. Moreover, the council believes that one child in four has the deck stacked against him by economic conditions, and to remedy this recommends giving people more money.

Is it possible that by raising the income levels of the poor that the reading levels of their children would be also raised? I believe this is an hypothesis worth testing. We have tested less worthy ones.

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